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ORAL HISTORY

NOTES ON AN EMERGING FIELD IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Karl-Heinz Reuband⁺

Within recent years, reconstructing the past by means of interviewing ("oral history") has rapidly gained popularity in the historical profession. Interest has been proliferating and research - especially in Anglo-Saxon countries - has been booming. Reflecting this trend the first extensive introduction to "oral history" was published last year by Paul Thompson (1), at the same time as Lutz Niethammer published a first review of "oral history" in a German historical journal. (2) And in March this year, the First International Oral History Conference took place at the University of Essex in Colchester, England. What then is the present state of "oral history" research? We shall try to outline some of the basic features.

1. Interest in oral history among historians has emerged in line with the increased interest in social history. In response to the lack of documentation about certain aspects of daily life and about people in certain locations of the social structure, interviewing people about their past has been seen as a method overcoming the deficiencies of available sources. Consequently, oral history projects have often focused on labour history or women's history. A further stimulus to oral history has been that more and more historians in a number of countries have taken interest into the recent past. Events which are still within living memory, constitute the object of their research. Interest in oral history has furthermore been fed by nonprofessional, broader cultural trends. Hereby the student revolt of the Sixties and the emergence of the "new left" have played some part. The broader cultural trends have given rise to a kind of ideological legitimization of "oral history": some of the arguments put forward in favour of the method have been that it is more democratic and humane. "It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact - and hence understanding - between social classes, and between generations. And to individual historians and others ... it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time. In short, it makes for fuller human beings". (3) This ideological perspective has also been of some importance in structuring the choice of the research topic and the social groups for investigation. It has further reinforced the tendency to choose less privileged groupings for research.

2. Oral history interviewing has taken diverse forms. The most common has been to interview a number of people about specific historical periods or events in which they have participated. The respondents are thereby used either as sources of information about themselves or as informants who can give information about

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the respective historical period. Unstructured or semistructured ("qualitative") interviewing represents the main device of data collection. The reason for using unstructured or semistructured (rather than structured and standardized) interviewing has usually been located in the specific problems that arise from the process of remembering. It has been shown that standardized interviewing gives less rise to intense processes of reflections and gives less chance to the interviewer to probe more intensely in order to reactivate the memory. Here and there the choice of the "qualitative" methodology has also had some ideological overtones, for instance, where qualitative interviewing is set against "neo-positivistic ... statistical methodology" or where arguments are made against making the respondent an "object" instead of a "subject" in research. The number of interviews range from a few people to large numbers such as 500 or more.

3. Sampling - where done systematically - has usually been on the basis of purposive sampling, taking people in diverse locations (or organizations) into account. Quota considerations have been important in this context. But mistaken notions about "quota sampling" do not seem to be uncommon. Thus P. Thompson views the advantage of quota sampling against random sampling in the fact that "since the choice of individual informants is not predetermined, there is no longer any need to force an interview on a respondent who remains unwilling...". His idea that people in random samples are more often forced to give an answer (which might then be false) seems excessively pessimistic when seen against the available results of social science experience in the survey field. It furthermore neglects the fact that volunteers often represent a highly selective and unrepresentative group: controlling for representativity only in certain social characteristics - such as urbanity or schooling - might not be sufficient. Representativity with regard to other characteristics - such as life style or attitudes might not exist within the quota determined groups.

4. The dominant mode of analysis has been qualitative in nature even where large masses of people were interviewed. Where the interviewees were solely used as experts who have something to say about their environments, such procedures might be seen as legitimate. In such a case the details of living are reconstructed by the bits of information given by different people and, partially, by the use of documents and contemporary descriptions as well. Where the interviewees themselves are made the object of analyses, however, strong objections could be made against qualitative procedures. In such kind of analysis, statements about "many" and "few" prevail, the danger of selective (consciously or unconsciously) use of the data in order to support one's preconceived notions cannot be ruled out. The reason for the heavy emphasis on qualitative analysis might partially lie in the lack of training for quantitative analysis among historians. Another reason might be more ideological in nature. It derives from the hermeneutical tradition among historians and the anti-neopositivistic attitudes of many of the "oral historians".

5. With regard to interviewing methodology, the level of sophistication among "oral historians" is low. Discussions frequently center more on the interpretation of the given material rather than on how to obtain valid data. The problem of qualitative interviewing - especially in semistructured ways, where some guidance is given

by the interviewers - is hardly recognized. It is often overlooked how serious the effects of varying question wordings might be. Furthermore systematic review of past experiences in oral history interviewing hardly exist and offer few guidelines. Partially due to their marginal position among traditional historians(4), oral historians often react overtly defensive when the validity of their data is questioned, even if they concede that problems of recall exist, they generally think that these problems are not too large. Results from the survey research literature in the social science field with regard to recall patterns are ignored or, if negative, neutralized by stressing the different methodology of interviewing ("unstructured rather than structured and standardized").

6. As a solution to problems of validity, it is suggested that one should look for internal consistency in the interview, cross-check details and weigh the evidence against a wider context. The limitations of this recommendation are twofold: internal consistency might not necessarily mean valid data - it might only mean consistent reevaluation of past events, attitudes or actions. Cross-checking is often not possible, especially if the individual is asked about his own life and not used as an informant about others. Here and there, moreover, refuge from the problem is too easily taken by arguing that "stories which are not literally true may be socially important because other people believe in them. Other stories may be of value ... for their symbolic meaning rather than for the narrative itself".(5) How could one assess whether symbolic meaning might exist unless one knows that the story is true or not? As a consequence we are turned back to the need to optimize the interview methodology. We need systematic research on what kind of strategies reactivate the memory best and offer the most valid data. But research on that has yet scarcely begun.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 P. Thompson: The voice of the past. Oral history. Oxford 1978
- 2 L. Niethammer: Oral history in den USA. Zur Entwicklung und Problematik diachroner Befragungen, in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte, 19, 1978
- 3 P. Thompson, op.cit., p.18
- 4 Traditional historians quite often criticize "oral history" because of the use of the interview as a data collection instrument. They are sceptical of the validity of interview data in general and, moreover, refer to the problems of recall. For them - in accordance with their habitual reliance on written documents - autobiographies, diaries and letters continue to be regarded as more respectable and reliable sources for understanding individual experiences and attitudes. They of these sources (such as autobiographies). They furthermore fail to see that only a tiny fraction of the population will be covered if use is made of these written documents only.
- 5 P. Thompson, op.cit., p.107